



# Gekker Quarterly

## Summer 2023 Issue

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# Restless Crows

## In the Garden & To Catch a Train

By Stephen Schulz



The crows were restless that day. They exhibited a behavior known officially as “cacophonous aggregation,” usually occurring in the presence of a dead conspecific; when one or more crows do gather around a fallen comrade and skold (a guttural squawk repeated in short concessions). These calls differ contextually from a simple alarm call to signal danger – the phenomenon is

truly a crow funeral (of sorts), though the exact function of the behavior, and whether or not crows actually possess a complex understanding of death, is unknown. (How appropriate that a “murder of crows” can also be a funeral).

The crows were restless that day. They skolded and they skolded. They had circled the house all morning; an incredible fluttering of wings, a great black mass, a ravenous, murderous funeral of crows. One of their species had eaten rat poison left out by some neighbors and yet brought itself to the Bauermanns’ garden to die. Its body was already decomposing due to anticoagulant chemicals that essentially deflated the bird with severe bleeding. A puddle of black feathers and a beak sank into the soil behind a large Iris plant, and was never noticed by anyone.

Lucy Bauermann always averted her gaze in a marital argument. She retreated into a niche within, ever fortified by denying her glance to Elijah. Elijah always looked on, waiting and hopeful for that time when Lucy might raise her eyes back up to him. She would sit and he would most usually stand. His standing annoyed Lucy, she felt as if Elijah were looming over her. Elijah didn’t think that he loomed. He was standing then, when there was a knock at the door. Lucy stared into the void from her seat and Elijah walked over to answer. It was usually expected of him to answer the door.

Elijah first peeked through the narrow window on the door to see who it was. He did not recognize the man, dressed in overalls and looking out over the garden with an odd smirk. The man caressed the stubble on his chin and by doing so mimed a pensive state. “Hello?” said Elijah.

The man took his time to acknowledge Elijah’s presence. He slowly turned his head and shifted his line of sight from the garden to Elijah. His smirk became larger, a forced smile that was painful to perform. His hand remained on his chin. He spoke through his teeth with an accent Elijah couldn’t place.

“Hi, I was hoping to get flowers,” the man said.

“Flowers?”

“I was driving, my truck is there, and I see your flowers.” He brought both his hands up to frame a tall row of old lilacs, blooming with the full glory of spring. The fragrance from the flowers was so pungent it nearly made the air shimmer. An open window wafted the scent indoors from night to early morning, filling the living room with a sweet perfume.

“Oh, you’d like to take home some lilac flowers. Yes, by all means, take a few.”

“I have a tool in my truck and I’d like to cut some of the branches with the flowers.”

“Sure, okay, cut a branch, just please don’t leave an awkward shape with the tree.”

“Yes, I’d like to cut some branches.”

“Well, how many branches are we talking here?”

“Well, we need some flowers for this weekend and I see your flowers and I love them.”

“Surprising somebody?”

“No, we have an event we need flowers for.”

“How many flowers do you need?”

“How many flowers will you let me have?”

“Oh, I don’t know, a dozen small branches, at the top where it could use some pruning, I noticed you have a ladder on your truck.”

“Just a dozen?”

“Yes, well, we like to look at them but I suppose I could spare a dozen.”

“I’ll get my pruner.” The man went across the street to where his pickup was parked. He pulled from the back a long tool nearly two meters in length with a curved saw blade on the end of it. Just beneath the saw was a lopper connected to a draw string that activated it, running the length of the pole-handle.

Elijah went back inside the house. Lucy was still looking at the floor. Elijah peered out from behind a curtain which partially covered an open window by the lilacs. The man with the pruner impressed Elijah with his swift skill, adroitly removing each carefully selected branch in a sharp instant.

“He looks like a professional,” Elijah said. Lucy said nothing. Elijah then finally registered the racket he had heard all morning as an enormous congregation of crows. He wanted to make a comment but knew it would anger Lucy as it was a frivolous distraction from their argument. He should be reengaging with her, he thought, but the man outside seemed done. Elijah hurried back out the door.

“You all done?” said Elijah.

“Ah, yes,” said the man. He adjusted his hat and a bead of sweat rolled down his face.

“Great, wow, you work fast, and the pruning actually looks nice that way.”

“Yeah, you know, I really would like to get those guys up there,” the man pointed to a couple of high branches that were loaded with plump clusters of purple flowers. He shrugged his shoulders. “But I already have a dozen.”

“Well go ahead and get those two at the top, that’s fine.” The man extended his device, pulling out a pole that had fit snugly into the pole-handle, doubling the length of the reach. Elijah did not go back inside, he stood on the front porch and watched the man for a moment. “So is this event on the weekend, is it a wedding or a birthday?”

“Oh, no, no, it’s at the market, the farmers’ market.”

“The farmers’ market, okay, so some social event at the market?”

“No.” The man cut the last of the two branches. “We are selling flowers at the market—I would like to get that guy too, but,” the man shrugged as he did before, “that’s okay I guess,” he shook his head gently and let out a tisk-tisk from between his teeth.

“Alright, well, good luck selling my flowers at the market.”

“Yes, I’ll get this stuff together here, and I’ll go, okay?”

“Sounds good, thanks, good luck.” Elijah watched the man gather his cuttings and tool into one mass that he then expertly hoisted over his shoulder and carried to the bed of his truck. Elijah waved as the man looked over while climbing into the driver’s seat. The man gave a limp wave in return and shut

the door to his vehicle. Elijah went back inside. He knew he should continue his conversation with Lucy, and that he had welcomed the interruptions, but he still needed to tend to the garden and chicken coop before it got too late and too hot outside.

“He’s gone,” said Elijah. Lucy raised her eyebrows and gave a slight nod while looking down at her mobile phone, her thumbs typing on the screen with strong intent. “I have to go and take care of the chickens, and I should water, it’s supposed to be a scorcher today... I’ll be right back.” There was a pause. “Did you hear that?”

“Yeah, okay,” said Lucy.

The Bauermanns could not afford to install an irrigation system, that is why Elijah always watered by hand with a hose. He was able, however, to attach an inexpensive brass nozzle to the end of the hose that, when loosened, would let out a pressurized stream of water. When tightened, the fixture would gradually lose its forceful propulsion and transform the emission into a fine mist before shutting off altogether.

Elijah took a moment to close his eyes and breathe the sweet inchoate air of early morning. Then, upon raising his eyelids, he noticed the house across the street, the house with the rat poison. It had been occupied until the week before but now it appeared empty. He saw the darkness beyond the front door, slightly ajar, still and deep in the stagnant morning sunlight and it mysteriously nauseated him. The neighbors who had lived there, for about a year, he had never spoken to beyond a few passing banalities at the mailboxes. And yet, he had a keen awareness of their presence: they were a couple, ageless, who constantly fought. Their yells echoed down the residential block almost daily. During their more heated bouts Elijah would tip-toe into the front garden giggling to himself and hide behind a tree, attempting to listen to their arguments like an old gossip. But alas, though their shouts were highly audible they somehow always lacked the intelligibility for spying ears to ever understand what the altercations were about.

Elijah turned the nozzle to let water out of the hose and forgot about the sick feeling. Practicing his watering technique seemed always to help him feel more at ease. Elijah had become quite adept at using the hose apparatus to suit the dynamic needs of watering the garden: he swiftly adjusted the nozzle from a gentle spray over the peonies to a hard jet to attack a wasps’ nest; he shifted in an instant from the droplets that mimicked a light rain on the raspberries to a

conical emission that expertly soaked a ring of green beans growing up their poles.

With watering finished, Elijah's next duty was to attend to the backyard chicken coop. He walked into the sunroom at the back of their house and filled a pitcher of feed from the sack he kept there. He remembered then that he left some table scraps as a treat for the chickens in a tub by the kitchen sink, but he didn't want to go back inside. He took the food that he had and opened the wire door to the pen. He filled a feeder that he had constructed out of milk jugs and suspended from a cord of nylon nailed to the ceiling of the enclosure. The chickens swarmed the feeder in a frenzy. Midst the frantic beaks, one of the lower ranking individuals pecked at some feed that landed on his shoe, surprising him.

Elijah saw that the water dispenser was low and filthy. He removed it and cleaned the crud with a sharp stream from the brass nozzle before filling it again with water. By the time Elijah placed the water in the pen the chickens had mostly lost their interest in feeding and began to venture out of the pen to graze in the backyard. It was then that Elijah noticed the presence of only five of the six chickens. Joan was missing.

Joan was Elijah's favorite chicken and also the alpha of the pecking order. On windy days it was Joan's habit to stand apart from the rest of the flock at the edge of the garden and stare at the fence—as if looking beyond the fence—while the wind ruffled her beautiful barred rock feathers. Elijah would joke that Joan was like a true leader, gazing into the future.

Elijah opened the door to the coop to check on Joan. The cool temperature of the morning was already disappearing, and the inside of the coop felt hot and stifled. There was also a peculiar humidity to the air that made Elijah imagine the inside of a blister. Joan was perched in the same spot where Elijah had left her the previous evening—he had seen Joan sitting on the ground of the coop that night, thought she had been confused by the dark, and so placed her on the long wooden perch with the others. She had not moved since. Elijah placed a hand on either side of the hen to gently lift and bring her to the outside light for inspection.

On the underside of the chicken he touched a cool neglectful liquid that slipped along the fissures of Elijah's calloused fingertips and poured into the pores of his skin with an almost preternatural potency, the effect of which was unknown to him. Stepping into the sunlight, Elijah looked the bird in the eye—she was vacant and listless. He investigated the feathers superficially around

her neck and her wings though he knew that the problem was underneath and that he was delaying its reveal to him.

Finally, Elijah flipped the chicken over. Though there was a strong visual, what struck him first was the odor—it was not that he hadn't smelled the odor prior to looking, he had catalogued in his automatic mind an oddly unpleasant scent, but it did not hit him fully and consciously until he was faced with it: a glistening scent of decay that blurred the air immediately near to it. Then, a moment later, after Elijah's eyes had adjusted to the sizzling putrid atmosphere, he saw what watery tickle had caressed his hands: a myriad of maggots writhing in a fetid soiree. The maggots had apparently made their home in a slash-like wound that ran the length of the bird's underside, and expanded into an inexplicable tangle of skin folds and dark dripping feathers. At the center of it all was a large bubble of exposed grey-damp skin.

Elijah began to choke on the atmosphere. There was a dangerous filth to the air that twisted in his nostrils. His eyes began to water, or perhaps it was that he wept, Elijah could not tell the difference. He had on him a pocket knife that he unfolded in a desperate attempt to lance the pustule on the poor bird. He peeled some more of the feathers around the boil to clear an area—the soaked feathers detached from the surface of the hen like clumps of warm butter. Steadily he held his small blade and punctured the balloon of grey skin which deflated rapidly, oozing a surprisingly clear fluid. He then pulled the knife across the loose skin, creating a long slit with relative ease. Elijah then pinched the top flap of skin and tore it to expose the flesh beneath—not raw but rather greenish, a deeper decay. Elijah tore at the skin still further beyond where the pustule had been. The denizens of the rot seemed almost aggravated by this action which gave Elijah some hope that he may rid Joan of them. He gave what little skin he could hold between the tips of his fingers a confident tug and ripped away a gelatinous triangle. But then Elijah gasped—revealed were many layers, nonsensical layers, all teeming with maggots. He knew then that it was hopeless.

“I'm so sorry Joan, I'm so sorry. This is it, poor girl, this is it,” Elijah spoke to the chicken who had remained motionless through the surgery. Elijah stood. Joan stayed on her side, too weak to even attempt to change position. Elijah made his way to the shed not far from where Joan lay, the shed where he kept his tools. Inside there was what he needed: a hatchet he rarely used. He looked too for a board of some kind to place under Joan, so that he may strike against a hard surface and give her a quick death. Leaned up against the wall was a pile of sticks used as stakes for gardening and behind them was a

flat board of wood, about 20 centimeters wide and one and a half meters in length. It was perfect for the job.

Gently Elijah laid Joan onto the board. She stretched her legs in a way that Elijah interpreted to be an invitation, as if she had a secret knowledge of what was to come. Elijah thought that he should cause her no panic and so covered her eyes with his palm. He aimed the small axe and rehearsed the motion, steadying his nerves. He then raised the hatchet to the appropriate distance, held his breath in concentration and brought it down swiftly. The head came off in a clean instant and Elijah commended himself on his accuracy. Elijah expected (according to common knowledge, having had no previous experience) the body of the chicken to scurry about wildly, but it was instead that the bird only slightly jerked its body in a pathetic weak manner. Elijah removed his hand from Joan's face and watched her softly close her eyes—he thought this to mean she was relieved.

Elijah took the spade he kept against the coop, sheltered by a bit of awning. The shovel had seemed to Elijah to lean morosely against the old wood of the coop exterior. There was then the question of where to dig. Elijah noticed a small patch of dirt behind some phlox in a fenced-off flower bed the chickens were kept from grazing in. Joan would have wanted to get in there and explore, Elijah thought, and so he began to dig.

Elijah was surprised at how large the hole needed to be—he placed Joan's body in the initial hole he had dug and it did not appear to adequately fit. He dug it wider and deeper to accommodate the bird's bulk. He was then about to cover the corpse when he realized that he had forgotten Joan's head. He was much gentler with the head and cradled it in his hands as if it were fragile and precious. He placed the head down on the ground a moment so that he may turn the rotten side of the body away and lay the head upon her cushiony feathers, as beautiful as they ever were. Upon doing so, Elijah felt an odd sort of misery, one that was sick and hazy. It was unfamiliar to him, and yet also known, as if having welcomed something strange but inexorable.

Elijah covered the sad bits of chicken offal (that unfathomably Joan was once comprised of) with earth, though he thought that perhaps it was not enough. He felt he needed a marker to commemorate Joan, as he had had no sepulcher to house her corpse. It was convenient, however, that many months prior, while trimming roses along a fence, Elijah had found an old bowling ball hidden among some dead tangled stems. Remembering this bowling ball, Elijah thought that it would make a suitable tombstone.

As Elijah pulled the bowling ball out from under the roses, and schlepped it across the lawn, he noticed that it was much heavier than he imagined, almost unbearably heavy. He set in the dirt over Joan. Elijah coughed and told himself he hoped he was not coming down with a cold, though in reality he had simply fought back tears. He did not wish to cry over a chicken, that was unacceptable.

Elijah returned indoors. The salient features of his presence, as detected by Lucy, were his outstretched arms and rigid hands, palms down, accompanied by an abnormal gait. She understood this behavior to be a theatrical display of hardships which had kept him outside for a prolonged duration of time. However, Lucy did not buy it, she saw through his spurious antics and attributed the delay to his usual desultory dilly-dallying. The strange mummy-like gesticulation of his arms and hands she execrated to be nothing more than the product of the rhapsodic intensity he experienced whilst practicing his hobby—alone, safe and inviolable without the “nagging wife.” She wondered if he really thought she was as horrid as that. Lucy considered Elijah’s silent judgment of her character to be wholly unfair, even cruel.

Elijah awkwardly and desperately washed his hands in the kitchen sink. He spoke across the house to the living room where Lucy still sat and told her of the incident matter-of-factly. Lucy, though never a true caretaker of the chickens, expressed not only shock but an almost loving sort of grief as to the loss of Joan. She had a gentle sob at the back of her throat as she spoke. Her expressed concern provided Elijah with a sense of intimacy that he had long forgotten about. He warmed to Lucy within himself and capitulated to admitting whatever wrong he had committed (so he may become, once again, physically close in addition to the emotional intimacy that she had so poignantly resurrected in him). Then he noticed the smell. Elijah realized that merely washing his hands was not helping the rot that aggressively invaded his nose. Lucy too became quickly aware of the foul odor and voiced her complaint. Elijah then decided to shower, and to launder his clothing, which Lucy concurred as the right course of action.

A week to the day after Joan’s death the Bauermanns’ television broke. Joan was not consequential to the machine breaking, but it was noted nevertheless by the Bauermanns as auspicious. A few days later a large package was dropped at their front door. They were not expecting a parcel of any kind, least of all a monolithic package that imposed triumphantly on their front porch. To their surprise and joy, however, the Bauermanns soon found that in the mysteriously giant box was an enormous television. Lucy’s father had bought for them the television as an act of sheer kindness (knowing via a phone

conversation that they had recently become television-less). It was much larger than their old television and not the sort they would normally be able to afford. There was only one problem: it did not fit on the old stand and they didn't have anything else to put it on.

Elijah went to the tool shed to look for a possible solution—there, in a sad dark corner, was the board he used as support to euthanize Joan. It was the perfect length and width for the legs of the television. He grabbed the board and placed it so that either end stretched equally beyond the edges of the old stand. The legs of the new television fit so well that they seemed made to rest on the board. A simple tablecloth hid the tacky appearance of the naked wood jutting beyond the edges of the old stand, proportionate though it was.

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The crows were restless that day. They exhibited a behavior known officially as “cacophonous aggregation,” usually occurring in the presence of a dead conspecific; when one or more crows do gather around a fallen comrade and skold (a guttural squawk repeated in short concessions). These calls differ contextually from a simple alarm call to signal danger – the phenomenon is truly a crow funeral (of sorts), though the exact function of the behavior, and whether or not crows actually possess a complex understanding of death, is unknown. (How appropriate that a “murder of crows” can also be a funeral).

The crows were restless that day. They skolded and they skolded. They had circled the house all morning; an incredible fluttering of wings, a great black mass, a ravenous, murderous funeral of crows. One of their species had hit the bedroom window and fallen dead into the garden; a neglected tangle of weeds soldiered by vociferous wasps. The bang against the glass had woken up Franz but he was too tired to investigate, he turned and waited for his alarm. The noise did not wake Ingrid, nor did she rise when Franz's alarm did finally buzz and shriek at 8 AM. She continued to breathe softly and snore. Her snores that morning were gentle and reminded Franz of a little bird rustling in the leaves beneath a tree. Franz and Ingrid were married.

Franz sat up and rubbed his eyes as he pictured the little bird. He felt a peculiar type of weariness, one that welled up within him like a flood and drowned any sense of rest. He could not fight it, there was no abating this wave of fatigue, he could only carry it like a heavy jug of water. He lifted the jug and trudged mechanically to the washroom. His hands caught the edge of the sink to prop up his body. His breath became short. It would take more than a simple rinse of the face on this day, he thought.

Franz then stepped into the shower. The water offered no refreshment, it merely seemed to weigh down on his wasted limbs like an oversaturated plant that topples into the mud. Franz thought that he was in the mud, though he lacked the energy to scrub himself clean. Franz could only let the shower stream down onto his shoulders. He dropped his head to face the floor as the water cascaded from his chin. His eyes were closed.

Franz dried his body before the steam-clouded mirror above the sink. He realized that he had no memory of how he arrived at the mirror from the shower, his movements had been purely automatic. He reached over the sink to wipe off some of the fog from the mirror so that he could see himself but then stopped after clearing a tiny area—he did not wish to see himself. Only his right eye was reflected, looking back at him. He noticed the fatigue in his eye. He sighed and touched his face. The roughness of his stubble dug into his soggy fingertips. He would leave it for today. He would only comb his hair. He used a small travel-sized comb—all other brushes and combs of medium size or larger were unconsciously confiscated for Ingrid's use.

At first the fine teeth of the little comb ran through Franz's thick black hair with relative ease. Out of routine, Franz passed the comb over the sides of his head, combed down the top of his reasonably short cut from the side part, and then finally came to the back. It was the back of the head where Franz felt an unusual snag on the comb. Some of the plastic teeth broke and fell into the sink. An odd soreness ached where the comb had been caught. He attempted a second time and again the comb was halted in its path, producing some pain. He pulled gently down on the comb and the pain increased beyond the strange discomfort, throbbing and pulsating down his spine. Franz immediately released the pressure on the comb and the pain slowly subsided.

Franz decided he would investigate. He fumbled through Ingrid's makeup bag and found a small hand-held mirror. He cleared away the remaining condensation on the mirror above the sink, turned his back to the sink, and held up the small mirror. It was difficult for Franz to see anything for he was trembling so badly he shook the mirror in his hand. He took in a deep breath and held it for a moment. With his nerves somewhat steadied, he then looked and spotted the region where the pain had come from—there was a translucent viscous gel clumped around the spot. Franz timidly parted the sticky hairs and saw a silver glinting object on his scalp. He leaned forward to get a better view but in effect made it more difficult to see. He corrected himself and kept the pocket mirror close to his face as he bent backwards to zoom in on the shiny material. He squinted his eyes and focused: it appeared

to be a small but brightly chromed slider of a zipper, about the size, in total, of a dime.

Franz was dumbfounded as to how a small slider of a zipper could have become stuck in his hair. Perhaps it fell off one of his wife's purses, he thought. There was also the question as to why tugging on the slider hurt so badly; perhaps because there was a nerve under the skin there, he thought. Filled with new-found confidence upon likely solving the riddle, he became determined to remove the irritant. It was clear that the slider was close to his scalp, so he planned on sniping the hair just beneath it and needed a thin instrument. He took out a small pair of scissors from Ingrid's bag perfect for the job and resumed the position from where he could view the slider. Franz poked at it and felt a sharpness, much like picking at a scab. He tried to wedge the blades of the scissors below the slider but could not seem to make any progress, and the harder he pressed the more it hurt. He leaned further back for a closer look. That was when Franz noticed a pair of zipper teeth, peeking just above the slider.

Franz shuddered and dropped the scissors. The wind rattled the branch of a tree against the washroom window. Ingrid's snores erupted into explosive gusts that punctuated perfectly the wind-swept world outside. Franz gently felt the teeth of the zipper rub against, almost nibble, his fingertips. The thought arose to see a doctor, but he was running late. The obvious course of action was to go to work and make an appointment while on his lunch break, hopefully for the very next day. His doctor was good about seeing him on short notice, he thought, though he had never truly seen his doctor on short notice. He wrapped a towel around himself and walked to the front door. On a stool near the door he kept his satchel. Inside his bag was his planner and so he wrote in it: "lunch- call dr.."

The best thing to do in a situation like this, he thought, was to put the matter completely out of his mind until the very moments in which he had to deal with the little problem directly, beginning at lunchtime. Franz exhaled as if a weight had been lifted. He walked briskly, almost gleefully, to the laundry room where it was Franz's ritual to dress. He always laid out an outfit there the night before. Franz would sometimes dry his socks and underwear for a few minutes on chilly mornings for the extra warmth.

There was a mirror in the laundry room Franz would dress by. He stood with excellent posture before this mirror and fastidiously fastened the buttons on his shirt. He did so slowly, keenly aware, and with such aplomb that he for a brief moment forgot all about the zipper. He felt normal. Franz unbunched

his socks, as he always did, and placed them in the dryer. The weather that morning was mild, one could even say warm, but Franz clung to the security of banal routine. The socks tumbled for a full five minutes while he leaned with his palms against the dryer, looking down at the glass door to the cabin. He watched the inside of the contraption spin and it filled his mind with nothing, not even lint.

The machine beeped that the timed dry was over and Franz bent down to retrieve his socks. In doing so he grazed the back of his head on the top of the entry to the dryer, thus reminding him of the zipper and its strange tenderness. That mysterious organ within him sank, the one that always sank whenever he was disappointed and then rose again with time, unnoticed. Franz put on his socks and then stood to check how the entire assemblage of his garments appeared in the mirror, socks included. He saw his organ sunken face and the temptation suddenly struck him: the desire to pull at the zipper once more.

Franz crept the tips of his fingers tentatively up the back of his neck and head. His hair, still slightly wet, felt like a soft meadow damp with dew. There issued out from his scalp a seductive sensuality, as if he lay in this meadow and bathed in its moisture. His eyes closed as his index finger touched the viscous fluid that leaked from the zipper, a dripping sensual seduction of goo. And right above it was the slider, cool and rigid. He pinched the slider between his index finger and thumb and slowly pulled downward. There was pain again but it was different, a different sort of tenderness, like that of sore muscles kneaded by sympathetic hands.

The slider passed along the zipper teeth without resistance, though Franz moved the slider below each pair of teeth slowly, methodically, and with a bewildering pleasure that at the same time ran parallel to mounting apprehension. He had shifted the slider down ten pairs of teeth with gentle ease but then, abruptly, he stopped. He was afraid of how much further he could go. And yet, Franz's fear was soon replaced with an overwhelming instinct to take his index finger and prod the space between the exposed zipper teeth.

The viscous goo fell in a clump over the back of his hand. The teeth bit down on either side of his finger as he ran it halfway up the exposed area. His eyes remaining closed, Franz applied a small amount of pressure to this space. A sizzle of tiny bubbles tickled his fingertip. He increased the pressure and pushed so that half of the width of his finger poked beyond the teeth. The

effervescence also rose in intensity, fizzing frenziedly around his finger. Though there was an ethereal nature to these bubbles—light, almost giddy.

Franz recoiled his finger in alarm. Nothing had happened that would have caused him to sense alarm, but that was the point: he was distrusting of his feelings, for he didn't know what could be at the end of where the bizarrely pleasurable allure of prodding could take him; that the giddy bubbles sparkling around his finger were somehow representative of a quiet before the storm. He rubbed his index finger and thumb together and a sticky residue of the viscous fluid was dried by the friction and became coarse, flaking into tiny fragments that fell to the floor as dust. He noticed the time on his watch that he had placed on top of the washing machine but forgot to wear—he was running late.

Suddenly it occurred to Franz that he should not leave the zipper exposed. He quickly yanked the slider upwards and ignored the burning sensation that it caused—but it was not good enough, he must conceal the zipper altogether. He remembered then that there was a coat rack by the front door on which hung a few hats. He rarely wore hats and perhaps never to work, but he must, it was all that he could do on his way out the door. He ran to the front door, his eyes on the slippery hardwood hallway leading up to it, then looked up. He was startled for a moment, a brief fraction of a second that the brain took to catalogue the visual stimuli properly, during which he saw the coat rack as a bulging dark presence, skulking and grotesque. Franz nervously seized the hat easiest to grab as he brushed by; a summer straw beach hat entirely inappropriate for the rest of his dress.

As soon as he placed the straw hat on his head, an inexplicable dejection came up inside him, an emptiness in his gut. Franz labeled the feeling as hunger, he had skipped breakfast. He went to look at his watch but he had left it on the washing machine and there wasn't enough time to go back for it, he had to run. He held onto his hat so that it would not blow away and, shutting the door behind him, immediately broke into a run. If he ran he could still catch his train, he thought.

## **The Wonderful Wishes of a Little Girl and Boy**

**Written & illustrated by Anna Baldwin**



A little boy is born in a small house in a small town. He doesn't cry when he's born, he just looks at things like he recognizes them already. His parents give him a name and treat him like their child, but there is always something alien about him. When he is old enough that they expect he might start to pick up their language, he doesn't. Instead when they point at things and name them, he gives them different names and starts to develop his own language. (why should anyone get to tell him how to see the world?) Psychologists, linguists, gurus, all agree that this boy is a mystery. "You can have anything you want, if you'll only say it out loud", everyone tells him. He does, but they never understand him. Despite all the efforts in the world to teach him the right way, his tongue won't cooperate and his mouth moves seemingly without his own will.

So instead, he isolates himself and his parents give up on him. Their brain waves are too settled at this point in life to learn a new language, and so the family is helpless in understanding each other. The boy's existence is primal and lonely growing up without communication and he becomes a child recluse. His parents build him a special room with four big walls in a square and a single large skylight. He likes to paint instead of speak, so the skylight

provides optimal wall painting space and good lighting for his art. They give him a parrot to keep him company and he teaches it his language - the pair become inseparable. He spends all his time dreaming, and painting his dreams on the walls of his bedroom. They are always abstract. The boy sleeps all night, wakes up and paints dreams all day, goes back to bed, and in the morning his paint has always disappeared, and the walls are blank again. He thinks it is odd, but soon he begins to accept it as reality, that it is his duty to create and recreate forever.

One day, in the middle of a periwinkle-colored brush stroke, the glass in his skylight shatters and comes raining down, right into his paint cans, and a girl pokes her head through the ceiling, blocking his light. There is something funny about her, but he can't tell what it is, since she is blocking his light. He starts to argue with her since she has ruined his beautiful dream painting, and after a few sentences he realizes that they speak the same language. He asks her how, but she doesn't know.

"I only started speaking it when I heard you speaking it," she says, "because it only seemed natural to say your own words back to you. Why would I say anything other than what you could understand?"

Apparently she has been traveling for more than 100 years in search of someone interesting enough to keep her company. How old is she? She avoids the question. The only important thing, she says, is that he comes with her. Why? She avoids that question too. She does tell him that she has a genie friend who can give them anything they want if he'll just come with her. She saved the genie's life once in a Mexican standoff and now he owes her a million wishes. She lowers a rope down for the boy to climb up, but he can't decide for seven days and seven nights. He continues painting and dreaming while she waits and watches from the roof. On the seventh night, he dreams about her and wakes up deciding to leave. His parrot comes along, of course.

In the sunlight, he realizes that she is painted blue - that is what was funny about her. He asks why and she says it's because she found a blue flower once that she loved. She kept it in a pot by her bedside until it died and now she paints herself the color to remember her flower by. He thinks it's peculiar and asks if he can paint her different colors, since he has so many pretty paints,

but she refuses. It's too late to change her color now, she thinks. She's been blue for so long.

The world outside his bedroom is foreign and sometimes ugly. On their way to the genie the boy sees things he's never seen before (he never did much exploring or socializing, since he couldn't understand anyone). Some people look sad; they steal and cry and fight with each other. But, not everything is bad. He sees young people in love and old people in love, he smells bread and perfume, and pets dogs. He learns that he likes red nail polish on women, and men in cool hats. He sees a band of people with wings, playing music like it was warm water, scooping the stuff up in buckets and pouring it over his head.

They make the journey in less than two days, over the mountains and into an even smaller town where the girl has been living. The genie stays in a yellow motel called the Bumblebee, famous for its bedbugs and day-old coffee. They knock! knock! on the door to his room, and it's much bigger on the inside than one would think - an optical illusion, or a magic trick? (He is a genie, and magic is never off the table). The room is full of pots and pots of little trees and hanging flower bushes, and in the midst of this motel jungle sits the genie, on a royal purple cushion, like one would imagine a genie sitting on. He has a long white beard and little butterflies have made their home in it. He introduces himself, but the boy still speaks that unspeakable language and understands no other, so the girl interprets.

He is older than the earth, the genie says. He came when God was invented, from a faraway place, to start a charity for delusional humans. It was called something witty, but he can't remember the name now, it was so long ago (the point of the charity was to give people all the wishes they wanted until they realized how delusional they were, but he doesn't tell the children, because it's precisely what he's been doing for the girl).

They get down to business and the girl tells the genie that they want to cash in some wishes. They have been dreaming up a planet all for themselves on the way here, and it's time to pay the dream planet a visit.

It has pink skies and lots of little suns like stars, because it makes the best lighting for the little boy's painting. It's not too big and they can take a trip around it in less than three days. There is one river, made of liquid jade, that flows perpetually in one direction like a ring around the planet. It takes some turns and dips so it's still fun, but you could ride that river eternally if you wanted. The trees are all sorts of heights and they're nicely spread out so the parrot has some fun bouncing between them. Each tree has a different leaf shape and a few of them house other parrots in all different colors, so theirs is never bored or lonely. The parrot picks up a habit of collecting all the different leaf shapes and making collages with them. The girl teaches it all the languages of the world that she has learned so far and they have fun singing to each other on quiet days (in her supposed 100 years of searching for a companion, the girl had come across all but 3 and a half languages, those spoken at the very edges of the earth).

They spend months on this planet all to themselves, but eventually they get bored, and the girl starts to write letters asking the genie to change things. First they make the sky green, and then they put candy on the trees instead of fruit. They turn the river into liquor and get drunk on it - they get rid of night and spend all their time eating sweets and riding the liquor river. They ask for a little wish machine that will give them anything they want, so they don't have to write letters anymore. The girl wishes for mirrors made of diamond and the boy wishes for more paint colors, so he doesn't have to mix anymore. It's just too much work, letters and mixing. The girl gets jealous of the boy and wishes that she could paint too. Now they can both paint and neither of them enjoy it. They even start to get visitors throughout the galaxy at some point, since they have the coolest planet around, but they don't enjoy that either. They make endless and endless wishes until they start to have a hard time deciding what to wish for.

The genie warns them in a letter one day that the more they wish for the less satisfied they will be, but the girl is not convinced. Eventually she decides for the both of them that their planet isn't fun anymore, and she wishes to go back to earth to live in her small town with the boy. He goes along just because he has no particular desire to go back to his family - that little room and his old dried up paint cans would be nothing compared to all the beautiful brushes and canvases he had been granted since then. The parrot doesn't have a say in the relocation, but it does miss leaf collecting. The leaves on earth aren't nearly as good for collages, and parrots don't catch on to philosophical lessons. Before they leave the girl and boy collect all the candy from the trees to sell when they get back home.

They make enough to buy a little house on the hill above the girl's town. Their house on the hill is made of wood; it is warm and full of sunlight and smells like earth. Apparently the boy and girl have gotten tired of extravagance. They have kept a few small paintings, which are hung on the outside of the little house, framing the doorway. The boy thinks it will attract kind travelers from the dirt road at the bottom of the hill, and it does. They stop frequently, oohing and aahing when they pass by. The girl becomes lonesome, because nobody oohs or ahs for her, so she starts to wander the woods searching for blue flowers to fill her time. She could wish for blue flowers, but then she wouldn't have anything to fill her time. She thinks maybe they will recognize her when she finds them, since she is blue too. Every night after her wandering, she and the boy make a wish for their dinner. She always wishes for sweets, and it always makes her stomach hurt.

The boy watches her grow sad over the days and weeks. She has had everything she could want for so long and it doesn't seem to do the trick anymore. They are nearing the end of the line with the genie, and she's afraid that all her wishes have been in vain. She wished for pleasure, and never found peace. So naturally, she starts wishing harder. She wishes herself a big fish pond full of frogs and teeming with fairies. The little fairies weave her crowns of lilies and baskets made of gold. She wishes for a magical garden that grows full meals at will. She wishes for people to come ooh and aah at her flowers and gold and she throws lavish banquets so the house is never empty. The days slip through her fingers like honey, leaving an unrelenting residue of goo that never seems to wash away. The boy won't even hold her hands anymore, they're so sticky.

The day comes when they have only one wish left. Neither of them can imagine what to do with it, so they put it off, and the girl disappears to wander the forest again for blue flowers. The boy has never been particularly attached to the wishing, but still the girl's sadness is troubling. He thinks she has put herself in a kind of imaginary room like the one he used to paint, and there is only one way out. He wants to break the glass of her skylight. No more wishes at all! He will give away this last wish in exchange for something much more great and true.

While she is out wandering on this sunny afternoon, he makes ready to leave in search of something great and true. He gathers up some courage off the shelves, stuffs it in a bag, slings the bag over his shoulder, and ventures into town. He brings the parrot with him to bridge his dialectic deficiency, since it can speak almost all the languages of the world.

He has not traveled by himself before and he becomes hyper aware of his solitary footsteps on the dirt road down the hill. It feels refreshing to be alone, since he has been busy for so long with the girl and wishing and throwing parties and painting. In fact, he walks extra slowly just to soak it all in. He takes some detours, stops occasionally to sit, and starts to wonder if he should even go back to the house, or strike out all on his own to start a new kind of life. However, after some time, he knows that he misses the girl and wants to see her smile again. He has enjoyed his time alone, and perhaps he will be alone again someday, but for now, he is on a different mission, and must return to it. So, he keeps on in a straight line for town, and keeps himself busy by counting the number of crows that fly by with a stick in their beaks. By the time he reaches the motel where the genie lives he counts 17. Apparently the Bumblebee is now called The Motel Genie, because the genie has become well known for his wishes and the owners decided the name might bring them good business.

The boy is coming to the genie to ask if he can give away their last wish instead of using it. He wonders if there is such a thing as wish fraud, but decides it is worth a try anyway. Some of his courage has spilled out of the bag on the way here, but he still has enough to knock on the genie's door.

Tap, tap, and the genie answers without opening: “WHAT DO YOU WANT?” It seems he’s gotten cocky while the boy and girl have been away (it must be because he has a motel in his name). Tap, tap again and he swings wide the door, in a towel, with the little burnt stump of a cigarette in his mouth. He recognizes the boy, laughs at himself for looking funny, and becomes kind again. Inside, he confesses he’s given up on his charity for people, that humans are hopeless and will never stop wishing. His business has turned to torture for him, made him miserable and angry. But maybe the boy and girl can still be helped. The parrot asks for the boy if they can give away their last wish, if only for a good cause. The boy wants to pay the winged people to come play music for the girl tonight, in the hopes that she’ll smile for real and not for wishes. Just music, that’s all. What a silly thing to spend a last wish on, the genie thinks at first. But he doesn’t see anything wrong with it and agrees. The boy leaves proudly with a handful of victory, carefully tucked into his pocket. The genie sits alone in his room and realizes the boy is not silly, but that he’s on exactly the right path to freedom - freedom from this terrible curse of wishing.

The boy makes his way downtown, where the winged people play all night on the dirty boulevard (if you’re ever looking for a good show, follow the sound of warm water being scooped up in buckets and poured over heads). When he finds them they have just finished a set and it seems like the perfect opportunity to approach them to pitch his idea.

Of course they’ll play, they say, if they can have anything they wish for. Tonight they’ve made 35 cents and an expired pizza coupon and a getaway would be nice. Maybe they’ll go to the beach and spend money on surf lessons. Perfect. The boy writes on their pizza coupon: “good for one last wish” and the deal is done.

They all pack up and make the trip back to the house on the hill, and the band sings for the boy on the way there.

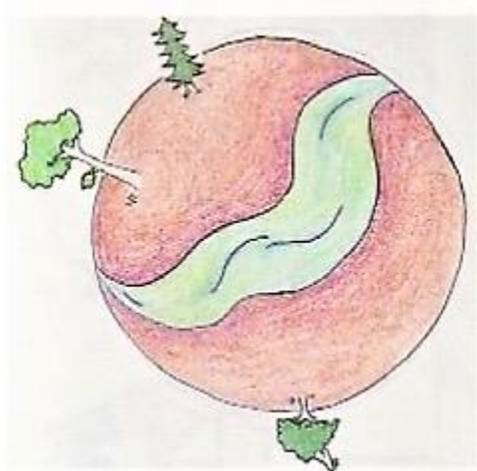
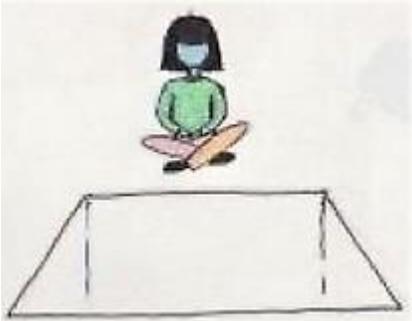
“What do you want us to play?”

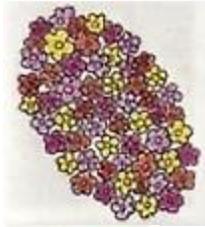
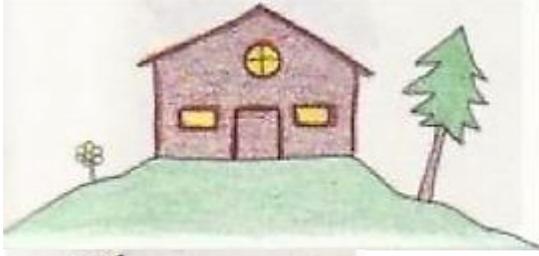
“Something jazzy, but made of magic.”

It's twilight now and starting to get dark, but the house is empty when they arrive - the girl is still out wandering. The boy burns candles and turns on their little colored bulbs that hang from the ceiling so the whole place is full of moving light. The band sets up quietly in a soft corner and they wait for the door to open. She returns after the sun has set, her blue paint running in little streams mixed with water and salt. She has not found her blue flowers. The boy doesn't take her hands, because they're still too sticky, but he has her sit on a bed of flowers in yellow, red, pink, and orange.

When she sits, the people with wings begin to pluck strings, their fingers bounce weightless on keys and that warm water again falls out of their mouths onto the floor when they sing. The warm water lifts the girl's flower bed as it rises and she starts to float atop it around the room, in little ripples made by little petals. The boy helps her wash off the honey from her hands and the blue paint from her skin until she's perfectly clean again. The water rises so high that it pushes them out the door and lays them on the grass outside, next to the big fish pond. The boy tells the girl that they have no wishes left, that he spent the last one for her. They're on their own now and he hopes she's not upset about it. But she isn't upset at all. She lays in the grass with him and they watch the stars dance until sleep comes.

When he opens his eyes, the boy finds himself in bed, looking up at a narrow box of light on a square ceiling. The light falls down into a box of a room, the room he left so long ago, the walls of which are painted in every shade the boy has ever seen. He has never woken up to paint on these walls - it always disappeared while he was sleeping. He takes in every detail and recognizes every stroke. The dream mural presents scenes of excitement, adventure, but pain, too, and sadness. It starts at the bottom corner of one wall and fills up every inch of paintable space, creating an abstract story out of color and line. He picks out pictures of the girl, the genie, their imaginary planet, the house on the hill, and finally the winged people in a pool of water made by music. Standing alone at the end of the paint story is the girl, clean where blue used to be, outlined but not filled in. He picks up his old paint brushes, still on the floor, and paints for her. He chooses all his favorite colors and makes little swirls across her skin. He puts a blue flower in her hand, and never paints again.







**-Quentin Ragan**

# Mitgefühl

**By Louise Greer**



**-Quentin Ragan**

We had just left the bustle of the underground. Rolling along the streets on a glorious September day, the heat no longer sat stifling, and the streetcar held a much kinder warmth than it had just a week before. The streets glowed in the late afternoon and despite the book tucked within my purse, I didn't want to miss a moment of the honey-hued light.

When we stopped at the Charlottenplatz market where tables sat laid out with bolts of brightly colored cloth, and old, faded books, the streetcar emptied save for a few. Only one shadow passed over me, a long-limbed man with oiled back curls cut off the light for a moment as he found a seat a few rows ahead. His cologne, thick and dewy, reached me even from that distance. We sat hushed within the yellow streetcar, lazy afternoon light dancing across the soft blue seats that held its warmth as we wove through the curves of Stuttgart. Past the Staatsgalerie, and the Neckartor, where, for a moment, the open doors let in a warm, sugary breath from the bakery on the corner. At the next stop, a girl got on and settled down across the aisle. She couldn't have been out of her teens yet and her long curly hair fell loose against her spine when she pulled her backpack into her lap. I smiled when I noticed what she wore, it reminded me of something I wore when I was her age: a navy blue skirt past her knees and an embroidered blouse. She turned to look out the

window just as the man, tall and dark-clad, moved seats to sit across from her. My stomach tightened with hers as she clutched her backpack closer.

“Hello.” He said to her, flashing a rainbow-shaped smile, his front teeth shorter than the rest. I made a mental note of that, and of his large eyes, so dark there was no center. In my youth, my friends taught me to make these notes. We watched out for each other, remembered details about the men around us, just in case. I still remember what I noted about my husband when I first saw him at the dancehall—blushed ears stuck out from either side of his head, eyes barely green, a slight limp from the war. Thankfully, he was a good man.

But, no matter how much times had changed, they had not changed enough, for I saw myself in that girl and held my breath. Rainbow smile, looming eyes, and he spoke a language other than my own, something blue-toned and soft. For a moment I thought perhaps she was safe, that the barrier between native tongues could also build a wall between them. But no, she spoke back, forgot to play dumb like she must have been taught at one point.

“Hello.” That much I understood, but then he began a flood of questions, and was pleased by her answers, asked another. I watched as she tried to gaze out the window, tried to become absorbed in the city map that she pulled from her bag—oh god, I thought, newly landed too. But he kept asking. Her cheeks flushed, not with pleasure, but by shame, by fear, by uncertainty. His eyes trailed down the concealed curves of her body, a smile blooming with the words “good girl”, that much I caught. Both his liquid obsidian eyes and her frozen form, stone cold.

As we crossed the river, sun glistening across ripples, he gestured east, and her body tensed, looking out the window in the direction of his finger. East? Down the river to the town of Esslingen? Don’t get off this train with him, I begged silently. Her politeness had deflated, I could see, the taut smile and nice words quickly fading, and she focused once more on the creased city map in her hands, as if she hadn’t already memorized it between all his questions. The rainbow network of this elaborate city lay full of escape routes, perhaps that is what she searched for. Having felt my stare, he glanced across the aisle at me, and I quickly turned to look out my own window at the freckled trees gaining their autumn colors.

When we pulled up to the Esslingen stop, he stood and asked her to go. When she refused, shaking her head, not daring to look up, he tried again with different words, and held up his hand, gesturing a telephone. Tell him lies, I

begged, tell him your phone's been disconnected. Tell him your roommates are waiting at home. Tell him your address is too new to be remembered. Thankfully she shook her head again, nearly too weary to lift her head, and he, all puff and steam, stormed off the train.

The breath she had been holding fell into her lap, and she tucked away her map, relief flooding her face as we pulled away from the station. You'll be okay, I wanted to say, but I didn't know her words. Instead, I gathered my things and moved to his empty seat, using the presence of my body to make up for my lack of language. Oh, and when we made eye contact, the sweet relief in her worn-out eyes. But, lacking her words, and her lacking mine, all I gave was a soft smile, and we both turned to gaze out the window at the world passing by.

# **The Seeds of Fate**

**By Sarita Dasgupta**



**-Quentin Ragan**

“Actions are the seeds of fate. Deeds grow into destiny.” (Harry S. Truman)

Brinda sat on the verandah of her little cottage and watched the mist slowly disappear as the sun grew brighter. She kept her mobile phone close by because she knew that calls from her family and friends would start coming in very soon. Trying to distract her mind, she looked at the beautifully laid out flower beds in the garden below, and thought again how fortunate she had been to find Robi, not only because he was a dedicated gardener with green fingers but also because he was from Assam where she had spent most of her life.

He had started working at the guest house almost a year ago. When she spoke to him in Assamese, he was taken aback but had quickly recovered and replied in the same language. He explained that his two older brothers worked for a security firm in Pune and had asked him to join them. However, he was more interested in gardening and had heard that Mahabaleshwar had beautiful flowers growing throughout the year, so he had decided to try his luck there.

“But why did you leave Assam?” she had asked. He had looked away and mumbled, “There is nothing for me there.”

She told him that she would take him on for a trial period of three months in which time he could also decide whether or not the job suited him. He had turned out to be extremely hardworking and an excellent gardener. The flower beds were always full of blooms and the kitchen had a steady supply of fresh herbs, papayas, and seasonal fruit and vegetables. She offered to hire someone to help him but he declined. She observed the way he nurtured the plants – gently and lovingly. Although he was practical about the herbs, fruit and vegetables, he hated cutting even a single flower. “As if they’re his children,” she thought. “Perhaps he doesn’t want anyone else touching them in case they handle them roughly and damage them.” She thought how fortunate she was to have found such a gem of a gardener for the guest house.

She sipped her tea and looked up at the hills across the shimmering lake as they were slowly bathed in the early morning light. “Nothing can compare to Nature’s beauty,” she thought, “and nothing can compare to Man’s inhumanity!” She shivered and pulled her shawl tighter around her.

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Ten years ago, Brinda’s husband, Pradeep, had been kidnapped by militants just a kilometre from the gates of the tea estate he managed in Assam when he was returning from a meeting one evening. Ironically, the meeting had been called by the District Commissioner to discuss the growing activities of the militants, and the precautions that potential targets needed to take! While the company Pradeep worked for, and the police, were trying to secure his release, his body, with the fatal bullet wound in the back, had been left outside the local police station in the dead of night. According to a press release by the high-profile militant group, he had died in an ‘accident’. All she could remember was being told by their friend, Surinder, that Pradeep was dead. Everything that came after seemed to be shrouded in a dense cloud in her mind.

“At least the body has been returned for the last rites, thank God!” she had heard someone comment. Then, it hadn’t made much of an impact but later, she realized that the militants could have quietly disposed of Pradeep’s body and she would never have known whether he was still alive or dead. Shuddering, she wondered how long she would have been able to cope, seesawing between hope and despair.

She never knew how he had come to be shot in the back by ‘accident’ but their friends as well as the media believed that he had been shot while trying to escape. Surinder’s wife, Kiran, had said, “He must have been desperate to come back to you.”

“Desperate to come back to his liquor, more likely,” had been the unbidden thought that had come into her still-stunned mind, only to be hastily erased.

She thought of the innumerable club functions and parties over the last year... how she had dreaded them! Pradeep, the loving husband, cheerful friend and dignified ‘Burra Sahab’ would turn into someone quite different after a few drinks. There he would be, arguing loudly in slurred tones, swaying his way to the dinner table, more often than not dropping his fork if not the whole plate of food. And she would smile and smile, holding on to the shreds of her pride. Their friends would make a joke of it and bundle him into the car while she thanked the hosts and tried to make as dignified an exit as possible. At those times she would feel something akin to hate for the man snoring beside her in the back seat. But the next day, he would be his usual self and she couldn’t help loving him.

She tried to talk to him about his drinking and explain how humiliating his behaviour was, for both of them. He would promise to give it up but forget as soon as he came home in the evening. He had started drinking every evening while she had been away in Los Angeles for a month the previous year, looking after her niece while her sister was recuperating after an operation. That had been the longest that they’d been apart since they were married. By the time she returned, his daily dose of liquor was an established routine. When she tried to remonstrate, it led to a huge fight culminating in her threat to leave him. He looked at her levelly and said, “Then go!”

The next day, of course, he apologized and become quite emotional. “It’s this job,” he explained. “There’s so much stress. Not only the pressures that come with the job, but external factors like this insurgency problem. You weren’t here to talk to, and I needed to de-stress. Try to understand, sweetheart.”

“But I’m back now, and I’m not going anywhere,” she said.

He patted her shoulder affectionately and left for work, but that evening, the glass of amber fluid was back in his hand. Brinda had seriously considered her options, although she knew she didn’t really have any. As she had married Pradeep straight after her Class 12 examinations, she had neither the qualifications nor the experience to get a job. Deep down, she knew she lacked

the confidence to be on her own. She also knew that left on his own, Pradeep would just go from bad to worse. After all, hadn't that been the very reason why he started drinking while she'd been away? Out of loneliness? She loved him too much to leave him and risk his becoming an alcoholic. She tried her best to control his alcohol intake as much as possible, incurring his wrath in the process. Despite the deep love between them, their relationship was very strained when he was kidnapped but no one would have guessed. She had held up appearances to the last.

But after his tragic death, all that unpleasantness was forgotten. She could only remember how much they had loved each other, and her heart wrenched with the realization that she would never, ever, see him again, or hear his voice, or feel his touch. While she moved around in a fog, haunted by the horror of Pradeep's violent death, waking drenched with sweat from nightmares in the wee hours, Surinder, and Pradeep's other colleagues, organized everything – the cremation, the 'Shraddh' ceremony and the other rites. Pradeep's younger brother, Preetam, came from Mumbai and performed the last rites, as Brinda and Pradeep didn't have any children.

"Thank God my parents aren't alive today. They couldn't have borne such a terrible loss," Brinda heard Preetam say to Surinder out on the verandah. "When I think of my brother being shot in the back..." he shook his head, unable to express his anger and sorrow. Surinder squeezed his shoulder in sympathy.

"I hope his murderer is caught and punished. He should hang," said Surinder with quiet fury.

"Or be shot dead too," said Preetam.

"Yes, that might happen," said Surinder, "either in the hands of the police or his own comrades. There's been quite a hue and cry by the local people who liked and respected Pradeep very much. Many local politicians, businessmen, student leaders and the media have added their voices to the tea community's, condemning Pradeep's murder, and demanding that the persons responsible for it be brought to justice."

"But why did they choose to kidnap my brother in particular?" asked Preetam.

“I don’t think it was that. They were just looking for an opportunity to pick up any tea planter of a certain seniority and hold him for ransom, trying to force the Company to pay,” explained Surinder.

Brinda moved away, thinking, “So it was sheer bad luck that they picked up my husband!” She pressed her hands to her mouth to hold back her agonized sobs.

After the ‘Shraddh’, Preetam had to return to Mumbai, but planned to come back when Brinda was ready to leave. He was worried about leaving her on her own, but Surinder reassured him, saying, “Don’t worry. We are all here for her. Kiran and another friend, Devika, will stay with her, and supervise the packing,”

“Thank you. I’m relieved to know that. My wife can’t come because of our two-year-old son, and I came in a hurry, so I have to go back and organize a few things at work. Brinda’s parents are in USA with her sister. They were shocked and distressed but after discussing it with Brinda, I told them not to return. As soon as everything is settled, I’ll send her to Los Angeles,” he explained. “Please keep in touch and let me know when she’s ready to leave,” he added.

Surinder reassured him again, but Preetam had a hard time taking his leave of Brinda. What he didn’t know was that she was relieved to see him go. When Pradeep was alive, she had never realized how similar the two brothers were. Now, her heart skipped a beat every time she heard Preetam speak. The voices were different but the cadences were similar. Certain expressions, gestures, and even the walk, were very similar. It was bittersweet but disturbing at the same time. She hoped that, with time, it would stop bothering her, but for the moment, she couldn’t cope with these constant reminders. The fog in her mind was suddenly penetrated with the realization that Preetam had lost his brother; his only sibling, whom he had looked up to. She didn’t know what to say but hugged him hoping he would understand. He hugged her back and gave her a ghost of his usual smile. “How lucky I am to have a brother-in-law like Preetam!” she thought fondly. She was glad he didn’t know about Pradeep’s drinking and his embarrassing behaviour in the last year.

She pulled herself together to identify what she needed and what she didn’t, so that the packers could do the needful. Preetam was in constant touch with Surinder, and organized the transfer of her belongings to her flat in Kolkata. Between him and Surinder, they took care of everything while she just coasted along. She was very grateful to them both and also to Kiran, Devika and all her

other friends. She realized how true it was that the tea planters' community rallied around one of their own in times of need.

Everyone was so sympathetic and helpful. All the staff and workers on the estate came to bid her farewell and Pradeep's colleagues went to the airport to see her and Preetam off. She was touched by their kindness. On the flight to Kolkata, she looked with tearful eyes and heavy heart at the disappearing tea bushes below and was overcome by the sense of finality – Pradeep was gone forever and so was her life in the tea estates of Assam. It was the only life she had known as her father had also been a tea planter.

They spent a week in Kolkata doing all the necessary paperwork regarding Pradeep's benefits from the Company, his bank accounts and investments. Although everyone was very kind and helpful, Brinda didn't know what she would have done without Preetam. She was finding it really difficult to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes at a time. She couldn't free her mind from images of Pradeep being shot and falling dead. So lost was she in her own thoughts that she didn't notice the concerned looks that Preetam darted at her from time to time. He spoke to his wife Deepa, who was equally concerned.

After completing all the formalities, Brinda and Preetam locked up her flat and flew to Mumbai. There, two-year-old Rahul's antics took her mind off her grief for brief periods, but she seemed to be growing more and more silent. Deepa then decided to tackle the problem head on. She spoke gently to Brinda, suggesting that she talk to a counsellor. "Brin, you need to talk your heart out to someone who's not family." At first, Brinda demurred but at Deepa's affectionate insistence, agreed to see the counsellor Deepa's friend had recommended.

At first, she was unable to open up but the counsellor was so patient, sympathetic and non-judgmental, that she felt a growing sense of comfort.

"Although I grieve for Pradeep, part of me was relieved to be free of the constant unpleasantness and stress of the last year. I suppose this makes me feel guilty. And the fact that I had thought of leaving him," she told the counsellor.

"Listen, every marriage goes through its ups and downs, with spouses threatening to leave, or at least contemplating it. It's quite common," the counsellor assured her.

“I should remember the many good years we had and how loving he was,” said Brinda.

“Yes, dwell on the happy memories,” agreed the counsellor.

“But what do I do about the nightmares?” asked Brinda quietly. “I can’t get over the way he died. I’m filled with such rage...”

“Talk about it, Brinda. Express your sorrow and rage. Don’t bottle it up,” advised the counsellor.

At the end of a month, she realized what a good decision going to the counsellor had been. She felt much lighter and better able to deal with her loss, and also with the guilt she felt at having contemplated leaving Pradeep. Even when she was in USA surrounded by the loving comfort of her parents, sister, brother-in-law and little niece, she kept in touch with her counsellor.

After returning to India, the thought of being on her own after living with someone for twenty years, terrified her. Before the tragedy, her parents had already decided to stay on in USA since their sponsorship had come through. “But we’ll come back to India if you need us to, Brinda,” her mother had offered.

“No, no, Ma,” she’d said. “I’ll be okay.” She knew that she would be all right financially. She was not an extravagant person. She would live carefully. Much to her surprise, however, soon after she returned from USA, she was offered a job by Manav, a friend of Preetam’s, who owned a small guest house in Mahabaleshwar, a hill station a few hours’ drive from Mumbai.

“Is he doing this as a favour to you or because he feels sorry for me?” she asked Preetam.

“Neither,” was Preetam’s reply. “He stayed with you and Pradeep in Assam for a few days, remember? He was really impressed with your skills as a hostess, and thinks you are just the person he’s looking for. It’s a small, homely place, with only ten rooms. Manav has a chap who looks after the bookings, billing and the finances. He wants you to look after the rooms, the food, and the garden, and manage the staff. You know, the housekeeping part.”

Deepa encouraged her to take it, saying, “You kept a beautiful house and know how to manage the household staff. You can make menus for every meal

without giving it much thought. Come on, you can do this with your eyes shut, Brin! And Mahabaleshwar's just a few hours away from us. You can come here when you crave the bright lights and we can come to you when we want to run away from them!"

Preetam added, "Give it a try, Brin. You can leave if you don't like it."

"But I don't have any qualifications..." she began, but Preetam cut her short, saying, "Listen Brin. I work in HR so I know that qualifications don't always reflect a person's abilities. Manav's years of experience have taught him this too. You have skills and abilities that were honed over two decades of experience. You are efficient and organized. It's just that no one gave you a certificate validating your skills. Come on, I've never seen you lack confidence in dealing with anyone – from VIPs to your household staff. So, what's the problem?"

"That was in my own home and my own, familiar, world, Preetam. I don't know if I have the courage..."

Brinda was cut short again by Preetam, who exclaimed with disbelief, "You don't know if you have the courage! Good God, Brin. Look at the way in which you've dealt with Pradeep's death! That's called quiet courage. Courage isn't always flamboyant, you know. Just living from one day to the next after a loss like yours with the dignity you've shown, takes courage. So, stop talking rot, and take up Manav's offer. It's a job that's tailor-made for you. Discuss it with your parents and Kiran. I'm sure they'll agree with me."

"But what about my flat in Kolkata?" asked Brinda.

"We'll find you a reliable tenant," was Preetam's reply. He spoke to a friend in Kolkata who contacted a broker. Within a fortnight, a tenant had been found.

"So, now are you ready to take on the job?" asked Preetam.

"I...I...think so," replied Brinda hesitantly. Seeing Preetam's reproving look, she hastily added, "Okay, okay, I don't need another morale boosting lecture. I'm ready to go to Mahabaleshwar and start the next chapter of my life."

"That's good to hear," said Preetam, "because I've already told Manav we'll drive up on Saturday!"

Brinda gave him an outraged look but he just grinned and left the room. Deepa came up to her and gave her a hug. “It’ll be fine, you’ll see,” she said reassuringly.

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That had been ten years ago. She had loved the quaint guest house and the garden with its colourful flowers. Her little cottage on a promontory in a corner of the property was reminiscent of the smaller bungalows that she and Pradeep had lived in while he was still an Assistant Manager. She settled in comfortably and found that, just as Preetam and Deepa had assured her, running the guest house was very much like running her bungalow in Assam and looking after Company guests, who had mostly been strangers too. Soon, the same people kept coming back and recommending the guest house to friends. Her homemade strawberry jam, cupcakes and brownies, trifle pudding and all the other dishes she had learned to make while in the tea estates, and which she had taught the cooks in the guest house, were big hits with the guests. She was happy and proud when, on one of his fortnightly visits, Manav told her that she was excellent at her job.

He raised her salary and when she demurred, he said, “Listen, Brinda. The guest house is doing well because of you. You are marvellous with people. You have the personal touch. The guests come back because of you, your great menus, and your homemade delicacies! As for the staff, I don’t think I could have kept the same ones on for ten years if not for you. Do you think I’m going to risk losing you to some other place?”

Amazed, she said, “But I wouldn’t dream of leaving! I love it here.”

“I’m relieved to know that,” grinned Manav, “but you deserve a raise anyway.” For an infinitesimal moment, his eyes softened as they rested on her happy face, then he went on to discuss work in his usual brisk manner.

Over the last ten years, she had come to appreciate Manav’s business acumen and his integrity. She had also realized that under that practical demeanour lurked a very kind heart. One day, while talking to him, she absentmindedly noticed the grooves on his cheeks when he smiled, and the way his hair touched the collar of his shirt. She thought fondly that he really needed a good haircut and some new clothes. She impulsively told him this, and he actually blushed! She hastily apologized but on his next visit, she noticed that his hair was cut professionally and he was wearing very smart khaki Chinos with a checked shirt, corduroy jacket and loafers. She

complimented him most sincerely and he seemed pleased though slightly embarrassed.

He had made it clear that her personal guests, such as her family members and close friends, were welcome to stay free of cost. Her parents had come twice in the last ten years, her sister and family once, and Kiran and Surinder once. Preetam, Deepa and Rahul came very often so they insisted on paying, but Manav gave them the 'family discount'.

As the months passed in those idyllic surroundings, Brinda found it easier and easier to remember all the good things in her marriage but this made her miss Pradeep even more. She discovered that she could express her deepest feelings and thoughts in verse. Writing them down was cathartic and made her feel more at peace. She had slowly come to terms with her loss but was still anguished by the violent way in which Pradeep had died and the fact that his murderer was still unknown and unpunished as far as anyone knew. She sometimes had sleepless nights, and it was on such nights that she sat and expressed her feelings in verse. Last night, on the eve of Pradeep's tenth death anniversary, she had composed two poems. One was called 'Grief' and the other, 'Courage'. She looked down at her diary, and read the lines of the first one to herself.

### GRIEF

Grief is a lonely road  
That you stumble along  
Finding your own path  
Whether right or wrong  
There are no signposts  
To show you the way  
If someone guides you  
You can't hear what they say  
Your own voice is screaming  
So loud in your head  
"It just can't be true!  
He CANNOT be dead!"

Grief is a landscape  
Dim, grey and stark  
The sun never shines  
It's perpetually dark  
No colours of flowers

No blue of the sky  
No hues of a rainbow  
Can brighten your eye

The flames of the pyre  
Are all you can see  
As they turn him to ashes  
And he ceases to be  
The man that you loved  
For most of your life  
The man who so eagerly  
Made you his wife

Old habits die hard  
That's so very true  
The urge to share everything  
Never leaves you  
You instinctively press  
His number to call  
But he's not just away,  
He's not there at all!  
The touch of his hand  
So tender and warm  
His absolute love...  
Forever gone!  
You grow used to his absence  
As the years pass by  
You go on with your life –  
Or, at least, you try

Though Grief is beside you  
Wherever you go  
There is a lesson  
That now you know:  
Life is a blessing  
That one must prize  
Living it to the fullest  
Till the day one dies

By the time she had read the last line, her eyes were heavy with tears. She wiped them away, thinking, “Yes, Life is a blessing. There is so much I’m thankful for. Not the least being that I loved Pradeep, was loved by him, and

we were married for twenty years. I have a loving and supportive family, I have good friends, I have a job I enjoy doing, a kind and appreciative boss, and I live in this beautiful place.” She read the second poem.

### COURAGE

Courage is not the absence of fear  
But the ability to face it squarely  
Courage is not always flamboyant  
Like jumping off cliffs  
It is sometimes quiet  
Like facing the loss of a loved one  
And going on, one breath at a time  
It is putting grief and fear aside  
To focus on what has to be done  
It is finding that tiny bit of strength to carry on  
Every time you think you’ve exhausted it.  
It is opening your heart to love again  
Even though it quails at the fear of loss

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“Although, I highly doubt I’ll ever love again,” she said to herself. Her parents, sister, Preetam and Deepa had suggested gently that she keep an open mind about finding someone. “You’re only in your forties now, Brinda. Still a young woman,” Deepa had said. She and Preetam had not missed the softness in the fleeting looks Manav unwittingly sent in Brinda’s direction. They realized that although Brinda seemed fond of Manav and enjoyed his company, she was quite oblivious to his feelings, still wrapped up as she was in her grief.

“It’s because she hasn’t got closure,” said Deepa. “Pradeep’s murderer is still out there as far as we know.”

Preetam nodded in agreement. “It’s a pity. I can’t think of a better guy for her than Manav, though” he said. “I hope she sees that for herself, and soon.”

“Perhaps we could nudge things along a bit,” said Deepa thoughtfully.

“How?” asked her husband.

“Let me think about it,” was her reply.

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Sipping her tea, Brinda’s mind went back to her first meeting with Pradeep. She was home from her boarding school after her Class 10 Board examinations, and had a few months’ holiday to look forward to before she joined Junior College. Pradeep was her father’s new Assistant Manager. She was sixteen, he was twenty-three. For her, it had been ‘love at first sight’, but he hadn’t shown much interest in her at first. They partnered each other on the tennis court at their local club, and she wheedled him to teach her golf so that she could spend hours with him on the 18-hole golf course on Sundays.

“Only if your parents give their permission,” he had said.

Her father was rather surprised at her sudden interest in golf.

“I thought you said it was too slow for you, and you preferred to run about on the tennis court,” her father had commented with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, I’ve changed my mind,” she’d replied airily.

Her father looked at her mother enquiringly. “What do you think?”

“Golf will teach her patience and discipline. As long as Pradeep doesn’t mind, though,” was her mother’s reply.

“He doesn’t,” she assured them quickly.

Walking out of the dining room, Brinda froze as she heard her mother say, “You do realize Brinda has a crush on Pradeep, don’t you?”

“Yes. I suppose it’s only natural. He’s handsome, intelligent, and a good sportsman,” her father replied. “But don’t worry, we can trust him with her.”

“I’m sure we can,” said her mother, “otherwise I wouldn’t have agreed.”

Ears burning, Brinda stalked off to her room. “Am I that transparent?” she asked herself. “Oh no! Does Pradeep also realize I have a crush on him?” She was mortified. The next time they met, she was rather cool and cast oblique looks at him to see his reaction. He treated her with the same polite friendliness, so she concluded that he hadn’t guessed.

“My parents have said you can teach me to play golf, as long as you don’t mind. You don’t, do you?” she asked him anxiously.

“No, that’s fine. Your dad told me. I hope you’re serious, though. I don’t want to waste my time.”

“Oh yes, I’m serious,” she assured him.

“That’s fine, then,” he said. “We’ll start next Sunday. I’ll pick you up at 7 AM.”

“Seven o’clock in the morning? On a Sunday?” she asked in dismay.

“Yes. Please be ready on time,” he said.

“Yes sir,” she muttered under her breath, throwing a mock salute at his departing back.

“Where did you learn to play golf so well?” she asked him.

“At the Army golf course in Pune,” he replied, “when my dad was posted there. When he moved away, my brother and I became boarders at The Bishop’s School. There was always a friend of my father’s posted in Pune at any given time, who became our local guardian, so we got to play golf on Saturday mornings when we were allowed to go out, and during short holidays.”

“So, your father is an army officer?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “He’s in the army engineers. He’s a Major General.”

“Wow! That’s impressive,” she commented. He slanted her a smile. “Where are your parents now?” she asked.

“Back in Pune,” he replied. “They’re planning to settle there after retirement.”

“Okay. Does your mother work?” she asked.

“No, she’s an army wife, and like your mother, goes with Dad wherever he’s posted. She’s very involved in the welfare of army widows and children. Just

like your mother gets involved in the welfare of the tea estate workers and their children. Actually, our mothers are quite similar. Both elegant, efficient, well read, well spoken, and kind-hearted. They would have been assets to any company or institution they'd worked for," he said.

"Instead, they married a tea planter and army officer respectively, both involving frequent transfers and postings in remote areas," she said.

"Yes. My parents couldn't imagine living apart, except when he was posted in non-family stations," he added.

"Living apart was never an option for my parents either," said Brinda.

They smiled at each other sharing the confidence that comes from having parents who so obviously loved each other and their children.

"Pradeep is so handsome!" she wrote in a letter to her younger sister who was away at boarding school, "but doesn't seem to realize it." Her sister was her best friend and confidante. "He is the 'complete package', yet not at all conceited." She went on to describe his various talents and virtues at such length that her sister wrote back asking if he was real! Brinda was indignant but smiled sheepishly when she remembered all that she had written. She had gone on a bit!

She and Pradeep slowly got to know each other over the next few months, and soon Pradeep was as besotted, much as he told himself, and her, that she was 'just a kid'.

"I never thought I'd fall in love with a teenager!" he told her.

"You talk like you're my grandfather!" she exclaimed. "You're only seven years older. That may seem like a lot now, but after a few years it won't matter."

"I suppose so, but it matters now. You're only sixteen!" he replied.

"But you love me! I still can't believe it," she said. Looking up into his eyes, she put her arms around his neck. He hugged her hard then released her.

"Don't do that, Brinda. It's hard for me. Your parents trust me to be the gentleman with you. I can't betray that trust."

“An officer and a gentleman,” she teased.

“Yes,” he said seriously.

When she finished Junior College after two years, Pradeep asked her father for permission to propose to her. Although her parents liked Pradeep, they felt she was too young to commit to marriage, and wanted her to graduate first. She was adamant and flatly refused to study any further.

“What for?” she asked. “I’m going to be a tea planter’s wife, which, as a tea planter’s daughter, I’m fully qualified for.”

Finally, her parents gave in, and Pradeep’s parents also agreed. They had always been good to her, she thought fondly now.

They got married and she couldn’t have been happier.

“Where’s that officer and gentleman now?” she teased after a very satisfactory bout of lovemaking.

“Right here,” he replied. “His only duty is to keep his wife happy in every way.”

When they found out that she was pregnant, they were ecstatic. But then she miscarried, and the gynaecologist asked them to do some tests. When they took the results to him, the doctor studied them and said, “I’m so sorry to have to tell you this, but judging from these test results, it’s better if you don’t have children together.”

Brinda heard a ringing in her ears through which she barely heard Pradeep asking, “What do you mean? Why shouldn’t we have children?”

The doctor was explaining about genes and chromosomes but Brinda just shut out the sound of his voice. All she could think was, “Never have a child! We can never have a child!”

Suddenly, she asked, “What do you mean by ‘together’?”

“I mean that you can have children with other people but not with each other. That’s the medical aspect. But of course, the question doesn’t arise, since you are married to each other,” the doctor added hastily.

Brinda brooded over the doctor's words and told Pradeep, "If you want to divorce me and marry someone else, and have children, just tell me."

"What? Are you crazy?" he exclaimed. "Of course, I don't want to divorce you! I love you. I want to be married to you for the rest of my life."

He held her tightly while she let the tears flow.

"Sweetheart, I'm as shattered as you are, but if we shouldn't have children, we have to accept it. You are more than enough for me. In fact, you are everything to me."

Later, he told her that the doctor had advised him to have a vasectomy.

"It's no big deal. They'll just tie a tube. I should have it done so that there are no accidental pregnancies," he said.

Their parents were devastated for them too.

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She was awakened from her reverie by the sound of the garden gate opening below. Looking down, she saw Robi, and called out to him. He looked startled to see her, but mounted the stone steps to her cottage, greeting her respectfully. She thought he looked pale and strained but before she could ask him what the matter was, one of the staff came running to say that she was wanted in the kitchen. Hurrying after him, just as her phone started ringing, she called out to the gardener over her shoulder, "Robi, I know you hate cutting flowers but, just for today, could you please cut some white roses and place them in the vase next to my husband's photograph on the mantelpiece in my drawing room? Thank you."

Robi descended the steps and went to one of the rose bushes, cut six white blooms reluctantly and walked slowly up to Brinda's cottage. He had never been inside before. Hesitantly, he entered the drawing room and looked around. Like a magnet, the photograph on the mantelpiece pulled his reluctant feet forward until he was staring at the smiling face of the only man he had ever killed in his life; ten years ago, on this day. Rooted to the spot, the roses falling from his nerveless hands, he thought he would faint. Then his mind went hurtling back...

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He was a teenager, frustrated with the endless penury of his days. His father, Laben, eked out a living planting paddy on a small piece of low-lying land which had belonged to his family for generations. He refused to augment his pittance of an income by working as a 'labourer' in the neighbouring tea estates. As a landowner, he felt it was below his dignity. However, he had no objection to his wife, Meena, working as a plucker on an estate, since the money she brought in enabled him to indulge his drinking and smoking. Robi despised his lazy and unambitious father but loved his mother. If not for her, he would have left home long ago. She had joined the scheme for weavers that the Manager's wife had started on the estate with the Company's help. Women were given thread and designs to take home and weave fabric on their hand looms in their own time. They were paid a reasonable sum for their work, and did not have to worry about the procurement of thread or the sale of the fabric. Meena was full of praise for the kind lady who was trying to help the women on the estate and surrounding villages to earn some extra income for themselves.

"The Burra Sahab and Memsahab are both very kind," Meena told Laben and Robi, as she showed them the money she had earned for her weaving.

"Huh! It's easy to be kind when you live in a big house filled with servants and roll about on money!" scoffed Laben, snatching the notes from her hand.

"Give that back!" she cried. "That money is for Robi's school fees!"

"School fees! Don't encourage that boy to waste his time in school, filling his head with ideas beyond his station in life. He should be working on our paddy fields," said Laben.

"Yes, I should be working while you lie back, drinking and smoking and wasting Ma's hard-earned money!" exclaimed Robi in disgust.

"Is that what you have learned in school? To speak disrespectfully to your father?" demanded Laben angrily, advancing on Robi menacingly.

"No, I have learned that respect has to be earned, so why don't you earn it, you good-for-nothing drunkard?" shouted Robi, and ran out of the house even as he heard his mother cry, "Robi!" in a distressed tone.

He and his friends always talked about getting away from what they thought of as their dead-end village. "There's nothing for us here. We have to go to a

city like Guwahati. That's the kind of life we want. Movie halls, restaurants, all kinds of shops..." Bipin said.

"Yes, and no money to spend on anything!" scoffed Nabin.

"We'll have to get jobs, of course," Robi said.

"Of course! People are just waiting to give us jobs!" Nabin said sarcastically. "After all, we are more well educated and qualified than all the city boys!"

Months later, Robi realized what easy recruits he and his friends must have been for the militants who were trying to enroll young boys and girls to fill their ranks. Disgruntled teens, looking for some excitement in their humdrum lives and the promise of money....

Along with the other recruits, he was trained in handling a gun. For a teenaged boy, this was the ultimate fantasy come true, till he had to carry the heavy gun and march over rough terrain for hours at a time. After months of tramping through dense forests, sleeping uncomfortably on hard ground while getting bitten by mosquitoes, and eating even more frugal meals than he'd done at home, his enthusiasm for 'the cause' was wearing rather thin. But when he was told to guard the prisoner in a room of the hut they were hiding in, he was proud of having been given such an important job, although he was surprised that the prisoner was never restrained. When he asked one of his comrades why this was so, he was told that they had no enmity towards the prisoner himself. In fact, he was highly respected by the local populace. "We have nothing against him personally, but he represents the Company. We want the Company to pay for his release. Then we'll use the money for our cause. He won't try to escape. Not with at least one gun trained on him at all times."

Robi held his weapon the way he had been taught to, and kept careful watch, but they had walked a long way through the jungle that day so he was tired and must have fallen asleep late at night. Suddenly, a slight sound woke him. Jerking up he saw the prisoner walking out of the door! Aghast and fearing the punishment he would face if he allowed the prisoner to escape, he shouted, "Stop, or I'll fire!" The man stopped and was turning around to tell him something but in his befuddled and nervous state, Robi's finger pressed the trigger and the next thing he knew, the man had fallen face down on the floor.

Hearing the shot, the others woke up and came rushing towards the room. But Robi didn't wait. He jumped out of the window, and ran... and ran...and ran...

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After almost a decade spent hiding from his erstwhile comrades who had faced a great deal of negative publicity after the prisoner's death, he landed up in Mahabaleshwar where he put his heart and soul into gardening. Perhaps giving life to plants and nurturing them had been his way of atoning for the life he had taken.

Now, he thought of Brinda who had been so kind to him and a strangled cry of agony left his lips. He heard footsteps approaching the cottage. Bolting out of the drawing room, he came face to face with a startled Brinda. He stared at her with agonized eyes, his slack lips trying to form some sort of apology, but words failed him. Looking away in terror and shame, he bolted down the steps, and ran...and ran...and ran... while Brinda stood frozen on the verandah, knowing instinctively that she had just seen the face of her husband's killer.

Watching the running figure grow smaller and smaller before disappearing from view, she felt the heaviness around her heart fall away at last.

There was no need to punish her husband's killer because he was already in hell.

# Poetry



Femme in Unity  
Kama



Fin de Siècle  
Cory Eberhart



Inhaling Kibwezi  
David Asia

# Femme in Unity

By Kama



Rooted by the very strands that teach us resilience  
The footsteps of femininity  
Where lines are blurred and new meaning finds its way to words  
One flower blooming while another wilts until  
The growth of one another is the growth of others still

Can equality be real?  
Is there space for a mutual respect and understanding to heal divided lines?  
Similarity is the foundation of even the most heightened discord  
Even when we're safe inside from the storm, we feel the effects of its rage  
When happiness seems to evade some more easily than others  
Some seem like they're always running away, hiding to stay alive and awake  
While others loom, hunter to prey  
Disgruntled by the fray of what it means to say no  
To stay brave in a world manufactured by separation

A link of solidarity weaves through our ribs, out through the heart  
Screaming stories of the concrete the flower broke through to reveal herself to  
the light

Despite the manmade plight of concrete  
The need to fight, to own, to abandon emotion  
Dissolved into the tangled web of roots  
Rooted from which all origin is created  
A womb of life connecting us all  
To be cherished, like the mother of dawn  
Like the mother of all fathers~

## Fin de Siècle

By Cory Eberhart



Pioneer extract, line of long descent  
Her homestead hearth and fire, a gathering  
Place where stove box kindled, fueled until burned  
To deep ash, coldly shoveled and carried  
Out to the yard, to the grove, to the field  
She plaited her braid, washed her face, the soap  
Made from lye and fats, a heated mix stirred  
Longer than day, long after darkness falls  
Through all of the in between; rising sun

Planetary orbit around a star,  
Setting cares down to sleep within the safe  
Sync of truth and life in time's distillate  
She did what she could from first to last breath  
Looking beyond the fin de siècle

# Inhaling Kibwezi

**By David Asia**



Some regrets  
Never evaporate.  
Empty rooms littered with stories  
Half remembered  
Half manufactured.  
    I can almost smell him.  
    Plain as day,  
    There, on the edge of the same road,  
    From Tsavo to Namanga in Southern Kenya.  
    And he is always there,  
    Framed by the flattened dome of Kilimanjaro.

Straight and lean, seeming as tall  
As the mountain in the distance,  
His smooth forehead rising from his brow  
Ending in a thin mat  
Of tightly twisted black hair.  
Like all Maasai men,  
He is draped in checkered red robes,  
Holding the slim stick of the cattleman.  
Or do I imagine it?

Is he instead wearing a white shirt  
And plain black pants?  
Was he really that tall?  
Decades have passed,  
And even in the palm of practiced memory,  
The mind plays tricks...

He sticks out his thumb and smiles.  
We stop,  
And he folds himself into  
The back seat of the VW,  
His cattle cane  
Extending out the window,  
Poking at the edge of the narrow track.  
He lives in a village outside Kibwezi,  
On our way, he says in deliberate English,  
Would we please  
Come to his village to meet his family?  
He asks this repeatedly.  
But we say no.  
We say,  
Thank you,  
But no.

We have reservations  
Or friends to meet  
In Amboseli,  
One thing or another.  
None of it true.

We were afraid,  
Too young to be trusted

With such generosity.  
So we drop him off and that's the end.  
Except for everything  
That didn't happen.

The modest smiles of his mother and father,  
The chattering of young cousins,  
And the murmurings  
Of the gathered elders,  
A meal of meat, milk, and honeycomb,  
His grandmother,  
Pursing her lips in a darkened corner,  
Vigilant,  
Unsure of yet more strangers.  
His younger sister,  
Her thumb in her mouth,  
Touches my beard with her free hand,  
The hair on my arms,  
The mystery of my white skin.  
Maybe  
We would have visited again,  
And again.  
Maybe they would have become like family.  
I would have learned their names,  
Walked with them to tend their cows,  
Our talk sprinkled with  
English, Maa, and Laughter.  
Maybe his sister would have lived with us  
While she finished university  
And we would have filled her bags  
With maps and chocolates  
Pens and note books  
Yards of cotton cloth  
The colors of honey blood and oranges  
A coffee pot for her papa.  
Ashe, she says, laughing,  
But it is too much!  
Ah ah, we say, embracing her,  
Inhaling Kibwezi  
In the beaded coils of her hair.  
It can never be enough.

# Essay



The Refuge of Being at Walden Pond

Jampa Dorje

## The Refuge of Being at Walden Pond

For Michael Goerger,  
philosopher extraordinaire

By Jampa Dorje



**-Quentin Ragan**

Henry David Thoreau may have been looking for a middle way between being a hermit living in the woods and, at the same time, being someone who appreciated the arts and sciences and found them useful. As he donned an ascetic's mantle and moved to Walden Pond, he was looking for solitude and the freedom to think his thoughts without the cacophonous energy of the industrial landscape that he found himself immersed in. Throughout his book, *Walden; or Life in the Woods*, first published in 1854, Thoreau admonishes his countrymen to realize how disconnected we are from Nature and how technology has added to our numbness and distress.

Thoreau deliberately chooses the woods as a place to deliberate on the meaning of life, a place where he can, as he puts it, live deliberately,—and I began to wonder about concepts like accident, adventitiousness, freedom, determinism/indeterminism, all the ways he “deliberately” went to the woods, when I flashed on his mention of Atropos at the beginning of his eulogy about the railroad in the chapter entitled “Sounds”:—

We have constructed a fate, an Atropos, that never turns aside. (Let that be the name of your engine.) Men are advertised that at a certain hour and minute these bolts will be shot toward particular points of the compass; yet it interferes with no man's business and the children go to school on the other track. We live the steadier for it. We are all educated thus to be

sons of Tell. The air is full of invisible bolts. Every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on your own track, then (PT 294).

A long quotation, I know, but there are pithy themes, herein...let me weed a couple of them out.

Atropos was the elder of The Three Fates of classical Greek mythology. Atropos cuts the thread of life spun by Clotho, the same thread that her sister, Lachesis had measured. Thoreau plays with the word, “bolt.” A woven length of cloth is a bolt, as well as the shuttle that shoots a weft of thread. An arrow (especially from a crossbow) is a bolt,—and the engine of a train (that “shuttles” the children to school) “bolts” down the track in a straight direction. Thoreau links the fabric of life as fated, an education that keeps us on track, to a general description of all of us as sons of Tell, the legendary Swiss patriot who saved his son from the threat of death by shooting an apple off his head. Amid this wild mix of metaphors, the William Tell bit is a doozy. Why are we sons of Tell?—and sons who, like Tell’s son, remain steadfast? Tell’s act was deliberate, his aim was straight,—as was Thoreau’s, when he wrote:—

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived (PT 271).

The sage in Thoreau is saying that we can be free of a fated life, a life imprisoned by necessity, the clock-like Newtonian universe, if only we get in touch with our original selves. In the railroad eulogy, it might seem that his praise of all the new technology is off track, but the poet in Thoreau sees glory in all things. However, contrary to his own inclinations, he’s fascinated; he has a World View for an instant, followed by ambivalence. He has looked the creator god, Brahma of the Hindus, in the face, but he knows his own path leads another way,—across the tracks. Thoreau looks at the continuum of commerce coming and going before his eyes and asks himself, at the beginning of a poem, “What’s the railroad to me?” And, at the end, he answers himself,

“It sets the sand a-blowing,  
And the blackberries a-growing,

but I cross it like a cart-path in the woods. I will not have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke and steam and hissing” (PT 297).

In a very loose sense, you might say Thoreau was practicing pranayama, a yogic discipline that uses the breath to activate the “life force.” Just by getting out the coal smoke, he was developing fresh-out-of-door lungs, which, in turn, allowed him to get into the flow of his life force, that is called prana in Hinduism, chi in Taoism, and, perhaps, God, in the sense of Spinoza’s pantheistic concept of God’s immanence in Nature. Let the mystics sort that out.

Once the pranayama techniques cleanse the esoteric channels, called nadis, and the prana is free to flow, the yogi is poised to liberate himself from karma,— or the rutted road of circumscribed causation. Thoreau has this insight in “Solitude”:—

By a conscious effort of the mind, we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature (PT 307).

Meandering further on his ontological ramble, Thoreau invokes Indra, another Hindu deity, and again takes a God-eye view, all in order to get around to saying that he isn’t lonely in the Universe.

Thoreau went to the woods deliberately, which is to say he made a conscious choice,—but another meaning of the word in the phrase to live deliberately is to say that he wanted to be in touch with his life in a more authentic way. Once he was alone in Nature, he could see another strata of consciousness, a certain doubleness (PT 308), which was his mere self beneath the layer of his social self. When he is leaving Walden Pond, he reflects on what he calls his “experiment” of living in the woods:—

The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! (PT 460).

And, then, with a pre-Jungian flourish, he notes that,—

...if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours (PT 460).

This he accomplished,—and having spent two winters in Alaska’s Tongass National Forest, living off the land, as well as completing a solitary three-year

meditation retreat in the Colorado Rockies, I can testify from personal experience that what he claims is so.

Primary source and suggested reading:

PT: The Portable Thoreau, edited by Jeffrey S. Cramer, Penguin Books, New York, 2012.

# This & That



**Printer & Printed:  
The Archival Arc of D Press**

**the process of a poet-printer**

**By Jampa Dorje (aka Richard Denner)**

**With related works by  
Clayton Bohnet & Larry Kerschner**



**Artist in Spotlight**

**the colcha embroidery of  
Phoebe Gonzales Rohrbacher**



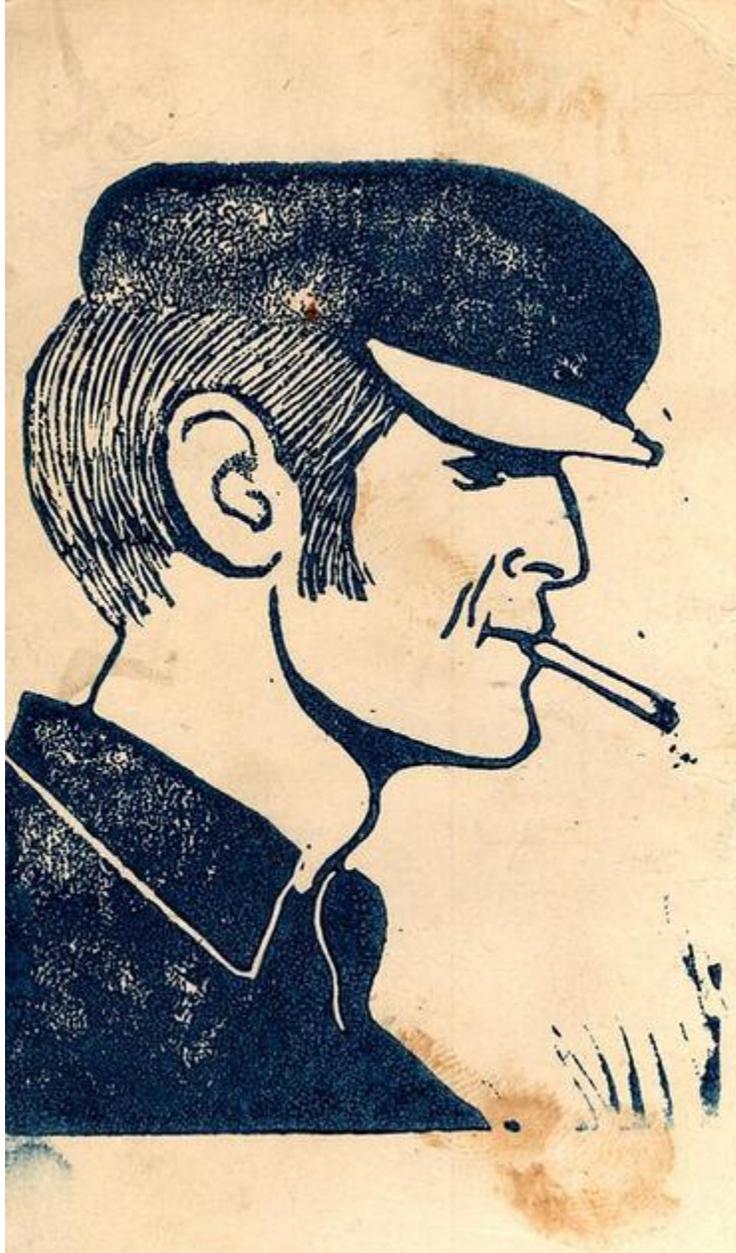
**PRINTER AND PRINTED:  
THE ARCHIVAL ARC OF D PRESS**

“Archive” is only a notion, an impression associated with a word and for which...we do not have a concept.

—Jacques Derrida, *Archival Fever*

My daughter, Lucienne, told me I should write about the intricacies of my oeuvre before I die, since my mode of writing is counterintuitive. Rather than beginning with the manuscript, I begin with the book. I initiate the writing process by visualizing the completed form the manuscript of my telling will take and fill in the empty pages. Over the years, the books have piled up.

I am fortunate to have twelve volumes of *The Collected Books of Richard Denner* archived in the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. I couldn't be deader—and yet dead in quite illustrious company. I rub shoulders with Shakespeare folios and Aztec codices. The Mark Twain Collection—rumors of Twain's demise still circulate—resides in opulent splendor. Here, one might expect to get some well-deserved rest, but after a brief suspension of time, one hears complaints about wormholes and arguments over shelf space...there is table tipping during seances convened by Madame Sosotris...and there is the sound of tears and laughter beyond the garden wall...but that is there, and this is here and now.





I publish chapbooks under the D Press logo. The “D” comes from the first letter of my last name, but there are other associations—feeling depressed and it being “the” press. Since the poems revealed my interests, I considered this an inner autobiography. Later in life, I began creating a prose narrative of my adventures, and I chose to have these stories told in the third person by a fictional biographer, Bouvard Pécuchet, whose name is derived from a combination of the last names of the protagonists of Gustave Flaubert’s novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, a pair of court clerks with intellectual curiosity, who delve into all branches of human knowledge with disastrous results. Combine two idiots and get one author.

In 1968, after I acquired a 1927 Kelsey “Excelsior” hand press, I began printing in an attic apartment in Ketchikan, near the ball field. I’d come home from a day’s work in the back shop of The Ketchikan Daily News, and I’d print 100 pages and hang them to dry on cotton string along the roofline of the apartment. On the weekends, I bound my books, set type, and prepared for the following week of printing. The printing was smudgy and uneven, but I pressed on. The typefaces were worn, so I over-inked and pressed harder, pressing the letters into the paper, embossing the page, letting the ink bleed through. Grant Risdon taught me how to cut linoleum blocks, and in a rush of visual imagery, I tipped my linoleum nudes into the books, alternating poems and blocks, giving color to the big words.



After reading *How to Live in the Woods on \$10/Week*, I moved with wife and child and press to Deep Bay, fifteen miles from the nearest road by boat. D Press moved into a new dimension. Pouring the words right into the type case seemed natural. I began to break my poems into smaller and smaller units. Tried to express myself with just the Anglo Saxon. I was printing with 60-point Bodoni type, and this limited the number of words that could be arranged in a 4X6 inch type case.

Constraints can be liberating.



# Toward the book through the computer

One of the uses of a computer is to solve the problem of justifying lines. Justified lines are the even alignment of letters at the margins of a text. It is the demarcation of where a line of type ends, not the end of a rhythmic line, where the number of scanned syllables makes one line a bit longer than the next because of the constituent parts of the sentence in various scripts and fonts. It's the printer's task to choose the right font and make the line end at a given spot, to choose the point size of the font so the longest line fits in the type case, within the margins. Poetry is usually justified to the left margin and proceeds as a dance of consonant and vowel. The carcass of prose is anchored to both margins with hyphenated word breaks. In letterpress printing, lines are justified by filling the space between pieces of hand-set lead type. In a computer, this operation is accomplished in a text box by clicking the appropriate format icon on the tool bar.

## Mapping the book

Mapping the book. First, I estimate the size of the book. Then, I make a dummy of the book by figuring out how much of my text will fit on a page, say 8½x11 inches, folded in half, or half-letter size. I count the lines and estimate how many pages it will take, adding a title page, a page for acknowledgements, dedication, and so forth. I divide it by four since there are going to be four pages on a sheet of paper folded in half. I take that number of blank sheets, fold them, and write the page number and an abbreviation of what text will appear on each page. This guides me since the opposite sides of the page are not consecutive. For example, in a 32-page book, page 1 is next to page 32, page 2 is coupled with page 31. If a given page is going to be blank, I write "blank" on it. I design the page setup in landscape and create my master pages, using a booklet publishing program. All this to say, if I want to add a new page of text, I have to think in terms of four pages.

Although the cost per copy decreases slightly when you reach certain print amounts, the unit cost per book is essentially the same for one book as it is for one hundred. This is in contrast to offset and letterpress processes where the

setup cost is much higher and the runs must be longer in order to make back the initial investment in labor and materials. I make short runs. I use the book as an editing tool—more, I often begin writing into the book, once the process takes hold, printing one copy at a time until I am satisfied with the layout and content—then, I run a handful of copies to be archived in the collections of a few friends. I sell books at readings and exchange books with poets that I meet, but, at present, I am not as interested in marketing my books as I am in the process of creation.

I work from the final form, the book that is already accomplished, like in a Tantric visualization, I develop the book by extending the vision, adding the ornaments, which are the poems. Marllarmé conceived of the book as a spiritual exercise. To me, the book fuses Newtonian sequence and Blakean simultaneity. It's a vehicle to write poems, the book as pen. I am writing with the book. Jack Spicer is my inspiration for molding serial poetry into small books. The poem arrives on the page, whether I collage it together from bits or carve it from a single block, whether I dream it or work it out as a puzzle. Once it makes it onto a sheet of paper and can be read, the poem is already a part of a book. And, once in a book, it gets lonely, wants to speak to other poems. I let it breathe, let it percolate, let it draw to itself magnetic companions, let them be a piece of a larger poem. What starts it?—a metaphor, maybe, or some scribbling on the washroom wall, something fleeting, a little synaptic firing in my brain. I get these firings into words and onto a page because I have developed a modicum of mind-body coordination, and the words might even mean something. I keep making books, this book overlapping the next, being sure to leave a bit undone, like a Navajo weaver bringing a thread to the edge, allowing the spirits to come and go.

I have printed with most media, from potato prints to the computer, linoleum block printing, wood block printing, mono prints, etching and engraving, mimeograph, offset and letterpress. Also, I combine printing techniques in a single volume. The rationale behind the making of small books and the controversy surrounding self-publishing is explored in detail by Belle Randall in her essay, "Having Tea with Blake: Self-publishing and the Art of Richard Denner," online at Big Bridge (Vol. 7), and which originally appeared in Vol.13, No.2 of Raven Chronicles.

The thrust of Belle's argument is that a poet has more control over his material, over the selection of materials, over layout and design elements and so forth. She points out that there is a long, honorable tradition of this kind of publishing. Small presses, which are often run by poets, publish not only their own work but the work of their friends, who may have presses of their own, and reciprocate in like fashion. I call this "collaborative publishing." There

are also “co-op” type publishing enterprises, where a group of poets join to edit, design, work on marketing, and then job out the printing of their members books. A new wave of publishing—although some of it has the look of being turned out by a cookie cutter—has arisen in the mainstream with the advent of “print-on-demand.”

When I moved to Santa Rosa, in 1998, to care for my elderly parents, I bought a used computer, a Compaq with one gig of memory and an early Windows operating system and began to data input my poems already published in a handful of chapbooks and manuscripts from a group of spring-backed thesis binders. By learning to use a computer to design my chapbooks, I returned to my Blakean muse at Deep Bay, pouring my poems directly into the Grail. I found it expedient to have blank templates of various sizes and formats that I could copy and use without building them from scratch, and this became my personal form of print-on-demand. My creative process accelerated.

In 2003, I had the inspiration to put all my chapbooks sequentially into bound volumes. These volumes would contain the books with their original typefaces and covers. Since all the masters were in my computer, it seemed to be an easy matter, simply print them out, reverse alternate pages, run them two-sided on the copy machine at Sprint, and then cut the stack in half and combine them into volumes. Easy to envision but not quite the way it was to be done. It took more time to organize and assemble 108 volumes in *The Collected Books of Richard Denner* than I had anticipated. The basic idea was sound for each individual chapbook, to cut and stack the pages; but the color cover had to be run off separately and inserted, and the process repeated for each chapbook, until the whole volume emerged and could be glued. I glued four books at a time in two groups to produce one eight-volume set, each with a cover in a hand-made box. Once complete, it was a history of D Press. As of 2023, using more advanced publishing tools, I have created twenty-three volumes of my collection that include 161 chapbooks. A professor of neurobiology at U.C. Berkeley, who I met at a Dzogchen retreat said, “It is the history of your mind.”

Visit *An Archive Artwork* [www.dpress.net](http://www.dpress.net)

## **Backward process**

# Jampa as Poet Mujahid

A poem that Jampa as a poet-printer

By Larry Kerschner



arriving at Berkeley at two weeks old

out of intermediate bardo state

between past life to be here

now and then

curious about Beatniks drawn to William Blake

watched for 18 years before contacting local poets

*I've heard it said that if you remember anything  
about Berkeley in the 60s, you weren't there*

a hauntingly handsome outlaw poet  
rough and ready Alaskan/printer/poet  
in Berkeley, reduced to a monad  
classified schizo-non-decisive,  
given Stelazine and ATD  
D-Press impressario poet mujahidãÎÇãĬ?  
misspellings and weird inking  
stylistic hallmarks of D-Press  
Jihad refers to a spiritual act which  
could be as simple as sharing your income with the poor  
as simple as sharing your poetry with the world  
Breastbeaters published 1963 by Berkeley Pamphlets  
*I knew that what I knew might not be true*

1965 Berkeley Poetry Conference "an event creating  
a white-light intensity that rivaled any drug experience  
and had more staying power" a difficult labor  
Berkeley Poetry Conference two  
weeks dinosaurs grazing in pastures of hemp  
microorganisms under an air-tight lid faery-demon  
foxfire dynamos a priori bunraku hooded  
puppeteers all poets Beat Black Mountain Reed  
strutting their stuff playing it fast playing it loose  
I think I know what I'll do  
I think I will decide to be happy  
a process of recovery

and discovery  
a contemplation of silence  
in this maelstrom of violence

Duncan remarks,

"One can write  
for or against  
the sun"

Pray for Buddha to shoot a cap up Mars's ass  
drinking from the cancer cup with my lips

and the lips of those who have suffered before me  
at the end of summer  
two boys and a dog  
splash in the river  
working from the final form, the book  
is already accomplished,  
like a Tantric visualization,  
develop the book by extending the vision,  
add the ornaments,  
which are the poems

I enter retreat, vowing  
to liberate my crazy concepts  
and to cut through my fear  
of the bear who lives in my outhouse  
Jampa makes friends wherever he goes  
and in whatever situation he finds himself  
whether it be a dinner party or a jail cell

Do I hear trumpets,  
or is it thunder?  
my approach =- learn it  
drunk, straight + stoned  
so, when you're "on stage"  
you can always perform

In a moment of despair, I asked  
Guru Rinpoche, "How did you do it?"  
He answered, in excellent English  
"Don't talk so much and press on!"

I won't talk  
to anyone  
today, my last  
words

were to you



***Obedient Convergence***

**-collage by Clayton Bohnet  
Barred Ledgers in Common**

**-a response to the political implications in archive/record-keeping ("ledger") & our sense of citizenship**

**By poet & friend of Jampa's, Clayton Bohnet**

ledger in common commits he to  
homeland

Mantel commands him to  
(the idles of) home  
Only Corners permit him to  
vanish  
Only the open permits his  
displays

We out of the corners of our eye  
watched the navigation steam  
Ship enterprise man oeure  
We were comforted to know it  
wasn't there, finally we  
battened down the hatches  
and spelled our limits  
on the bars



One of Jampa's latest sojourns into archive (or "unarchive," so to speak) is emptiness. Pictured here, Jampa stands by his installation at Gallery One in Ellensburg: a blank piece of wall he calls "emptiness."

In honor of this concept, there is a short section below we have left empty.

Thank you Jampa for both your prolific archives and your courage to face the void.

-The Gekker Team